DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 354 405 CE 063 149

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TITLE Farmers' Cooperatives in Nigeria: A Vehicle for Mutual Help and Education.
PUB DATE Dec 92
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the African Educational Research Symposium (8th, Athens, OH, December 5-7, 1992).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Farmer Education; Agribusiness; Collective Settlements; Community Development; *Cooperatives; Economic Opportunities; *Experiential Learning; Farmers; Foreign Countries; Leadership Training; Learning Experience; Marketing; Needs Assessment; Rural Education; Rural Extension; Young Farmer Education
IDENTIFIERS *Informal Education; *Nigeria (Imo State)

ABSTRACT

Data for a study of learning within farmers' cooperatives were collected by interviewing members of 25 such cooperatives in Imo State of Nigeria. Information was also gathered from a literature review and interviews with Nigerian government officials who worked closely with cooperatives. Three types of cooperative associations were identified: those where members own and operate communal farms as a group, cooperative societies that facilitate the business of members who remain independent farmers, and a mixture of these two, where a cooperative society operates communal farms and members operate their private farms as well. Learning activities are mostly informal. Members learn through observation and participation. By participating in planning and execution of projects, members develop planning, production, marketing, leadership, public relation, and community development skills. Although extension agents and cooperative inspectors play significant roles in the educational process, members are primarily their own teachers. Most educational activities are carried out according to plans based on needs and directions aimed at correcting weaknesses. Major problems of farmer cooperatives relate to conflicts of interest, poor member education, and lack of storage and processing facilities. Cooperatives contribute positively to the education, business, income, and well-being of their members. (YLB)

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Farmers' Cooperatives in Nigeria: A Vehicle for Mutual Help and Education

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A Paper Presented at
The Eighth African Educational
Research Symposium
Ohio University
Athens, Ohio
December 5-7, 1992

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Farmers' Cooperatives in Nigeria: A Vehicle for Mutual Help and Education

Introduction

Nigerian agriculture is characterized by numerous farmers operating small scattered tracts of land using traditional methods and implements like hoes and machetes, land rotation and "bush burning". Most farmers have limited resources, a factor that limits their investments, productivity, income and savings. Therefore, these farmers have taken a variety of actions to enhance their business and improve their well-being, including pooling their resources and working together as members of a cooperative.

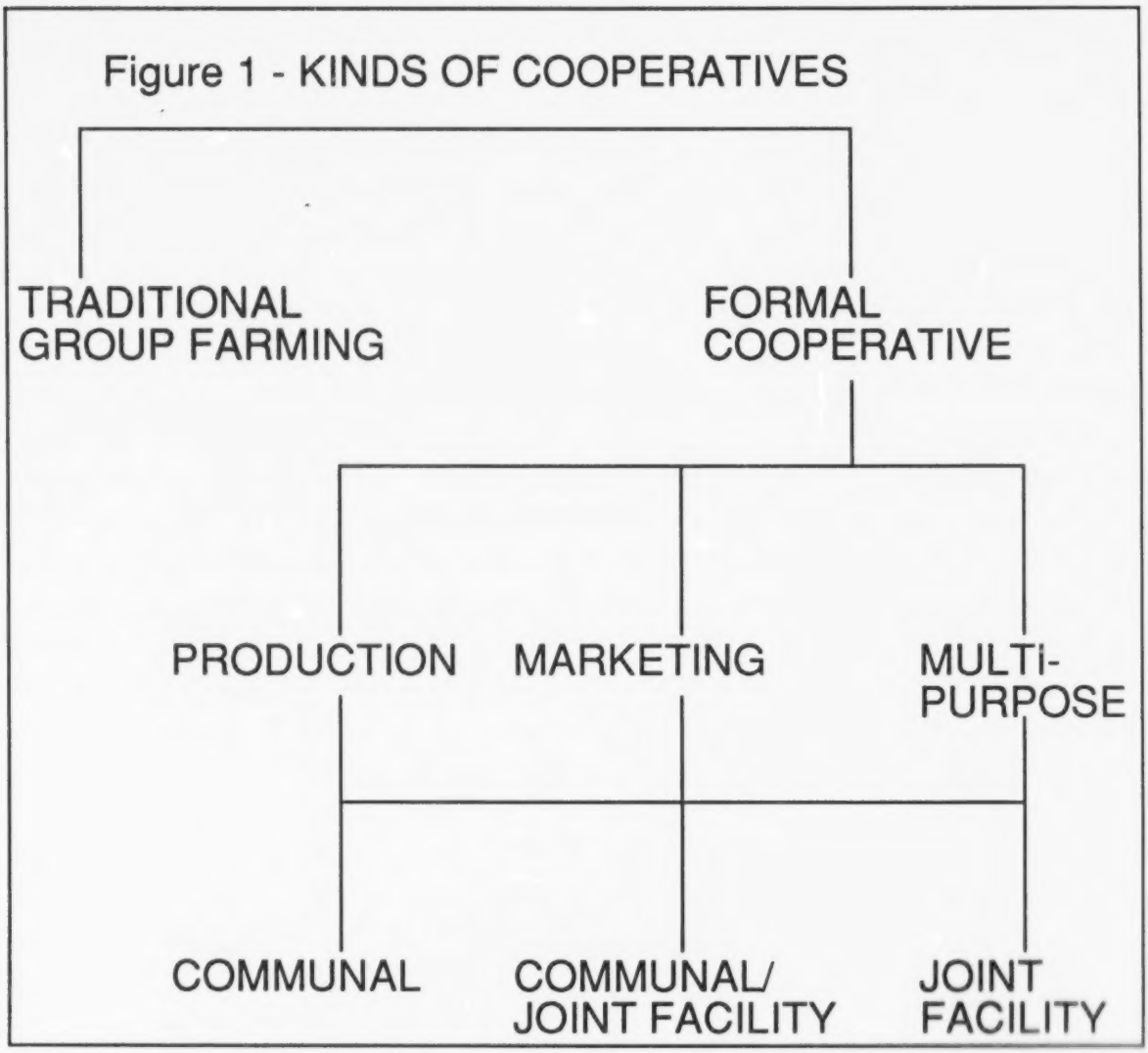
Farmers' cooperatives are associations of farmers who voluntarily come together to achieve a common goal through a democratically controlled business organization. Members contribute equitably to the capital and personnel requirements of their cooperative, and accept fair share for the risks and benefits of their undertakings. Nweke(1979) noted that various land, labor and capital problems of some Nigerian small farmers are generally solved through cooperative efforts. Usually, the association's stated goals are economic in nature but may be educational as well. The educational role of the Nigerian farmers' cooperative is the subject of this paper.

Purpose

This paper will explore how learning takes place within farmers' cooperatives in Nigeria; how learning objectives and expected outcomes are determined; who the learners and teachers are; and the educational importance of cooperatives. It will also discuss types of farmers' cooperatives, their management, and some issues facing the Nigerian cooperatives.

Methods

Data for this study were collected by interviewing members of 25 farmers' cooperatives in Imo State of Nigeria using an interview schedule. The 25 cooperatives (n) studied were selected randomly from a population of 66 farmers' cooperatives (N) in 7 cooperative zones. Interview schedule used was checked for validity by experts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. In addition, information was gathered from a review of literature and by interviewing Nigerian government officials who work closely with cooperatives. All interviews were conducted by the same person (the author) to insure that the interviews were done appropriately and consistently.



Kinds of Farmers' Cooperatives

Three types of cooperative association were identified (figure 1). They are: 1. where members own and operate communal farms as a group, 2. cooperative societies that facilitate the business of members who remain basically independent farmers, and 3. a mixture of these two types, where a cooperative society operates communal farms, and the members operate their private farms as well. Similar kinds of cooperatives were observed by Osuntogun (1972) and Chidebelu (1986). A given form of cooperative relationship may be preferred under certain circumstances. For instance, a communal

type may be preferred where there are community owned farms. In the absence of communal farms, joint facility cooperatives may be preferred especially where members desire to operate their private farms..

In Nigeria, reciprocity in farm work appears to be as old as farming. Various kinds of formal and informal group farming activities have emerged over the years. A group farming association is not considered as a formal cooperative unless it is duly registered as one with the Ministry / Department of Cooperatives. A group farming association may be an ad hoc gathering of people to do a specific task, such as land clearing, planting, weeding or harvesting. These people after performing a given task for one member of the group, usually move over to another member's farm to do identical or comparable work. The group performs it's task in a definite order (circuit) so that the work required on each member's farm will be done once the circuit is completed. Members are seldom paid salaries/wages for their labor. But they are usually saved food and drinks when they work. Such refreshment are usually provided by the person(s) on whose farm the group is working. A cooperative can also be described as a production cooperative, marketing cooperative or multipurpose cooperative based on their business.

Management

The cooperatives are usually managed by the following groups and personnel: 1. the patrons (general body of members), 2. committees, and 3. the executive officers. Members meet from time to time to review the association's activities and financial situation. At such meetings, they plan new activities and delegate duties and responsibilities to the committees and officers. (For more detailed discussion of management and structure of farmers' cooperatives in Imo State of Nigeria, see Ukaga et al 1991).

Education

Learning activities within the cooperatives are mostly informal, meaning that education within the cooperatives typically is not planned and does not follow a rigid structure. Members learn through observation and participation. Joining a cooperative association is voluntary, but members have to participate in meetings, farm-work and other learning experiences. By participating in planning and execution of projects, members of cooperatives develop planning, production, marketing, leadership, public relation, and community development skills.

Although "outsiders" like extension agents and cooperative inspectors play significant roles in the educational process, members are primarily their own teachers.

Individual members of the cooperatives have a variety of useful skills and knowledge. By working together, they share their experiences, skills and knowledge among themselves. Such sharing improves the knowledge of the individual members within the associations. There is usually a high level of interaction among members.

Curricula are not required for this kind of education because prevailing circumstances and needs determine what members do and what they learn. However, most activities of the cooperatives are carried out according to plans based on needs and directions aimed at correcting weaknesses. Ijere (1981) suggested that members of farmer cooperatives should be familiar with principles, policies and laws of cooperatives; advantages of cooperatives; how to organize cooperatives; duties and rights of members; modern farming methods and techniques; how to maintain soil fertility; water conservation; preservation of wildlife and plants; marketing and processing techniques; and problems of food shortage. Education in these and other areas, would enhance the cooperator' ability to deal with problems and issues that confront them.

Problems / Issues

Problems of farmer cooperatives in Nigeria relate to 1) conflicts of interest, 2) poor member education, 3) lack of storage and processing facilities, 4) a poor transportation system, 5) exploitation of members by dishonest members, 6) lack of effective leadership, 7) excessive government control, 8) perception of cooperatives as social institutions, 9) poor capitalization, 10) inadequate supervision by cooperative inspectors, 11) lack of total commitment by members, 12) poor service condition of staff, 13) inadequate and ill-timed supply of inputs, and 14) low membership (Ejiofor, 1986; Osuntogun, 1972; Idonije, 1983; Famoriyo and Ogungbile, 1981 and Okuneye, 1982)

Conflict may result when a member's input or expectation is at variance with that other members of the group. A member's attempt to redress the variance through unilateral actions, (e.g. defaulting on payments , not participating in communal work, e.t.c.) often leads to quarrels.

Poor educational status of members affects the efficiency of the association and it's management. Bad roads and a poor transportation system make it difficult for members to obtain inputs and market their products.

Most cooperatives are inadequately financed. Due to under capitalization, some associations are not able to procure facilities that are essential for competitive business operations. For instance, lack of storage facilities would discourage farmers from saving their produce until such a time that they can sell them at more reasonable prices and make money.

Educational Importance

Cooperatives have been around for centuries. Their use in development is obvious but their contribution to non formal education has not been well documented. The author's experience with cooperatives in Nigeria indicates that they can be a powerful educational tool. Interviews with members of the farmers' cooperatives studied revealed that these associations are contributing positively to the education, business, income and well-being of their members. We believe that cooperatives would make similar contributions in other countries and settings where individuals with limited resources are willing to pool their resources and work together.

The farmers' cooperatives provide members with unique business and educational opportunities. Members tend to acquire skills and knowledge they need to solve their immediate problems. Additionally, Extension Agents could easily educate, inform and assist farmers through their cooperatives. The introduction of rural farmers to modern production methods through cooperatives should be a gradual process starting from the lowest form of traditional cooperative methods and practices they already know to the highest developed cooperative methods and practices (Arua,1981). Such a process requires a planned period of time for learning to occur.

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